

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 10 | Spring 2010

Title	Come, Armageddon! Come! Queer Nihilism and the Margin of the Urban
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	10
Issue Date	Spring 2010
Publication Date	05/06/2010
Editors	Ally Crockford & Siobhan Fitzgerald

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Come, Armageddon! Come! Queer Nihilism and the Margin of the Urban

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I begin this paper with an epigraph from Federico García Lorca that highlights the coupling of two of the subjects covered herein:

It doesn't matter if every minute
a newborn child waves the little branches of its veins,
or if a newborn viper, uncoiling beneath the branches,
calms the blood lust of those who watch the naked man.
What matters is this: emptied space. (65)

To think about the literal position of a queer subject, that is, the place where the subject is materially and in relation to other subjects, is to confront the myriad ways in which that subject will be conditioned depending upon how proximate space is normatively differentiated and vice versa. In the context of urban space, by which I mean less a quantity than a quality of density, the spatial narrative that supports the queer subject is twofold—emigration and speculation. First, x escapes a repressive and oppressive rural environment to seek amnesty, either in the form of celebrated welcome or anonymity, in an urban one. Subsequently, x forages into the concrete jungle, creating and in pursuit of circuits of sexual partners and diverse sociabilities.

This trajectory, however, has become increasingly contested, both for the way in which it upholds an imaginary boundary between rural and urban and for the subjects it obscures in the process. Pointedly, Karen Tongson, in her essay *The Light That Never Goes Out: Butch Intimacies and Sub-Urban Sociabilities in 'Lesser Los Angeles,'* provides a reading of Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* and Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* next to Richard Florida's *Cities and the Creative Class* to suggest that “the cultural value assigned to urban modes of queer life—to its mobility, style, innovation, improvisation, liveliness, and ‘contact’—has appreciated urban property values while

depreciating modes of racialized queer sociability.” Significantly, then, cultural capital appreciates not only in direct proportion to urban property values, but also in favour of the “upwardly mobile queers,” who will eventually be able to inhabit them (364).

While Tongson’s analysis is site-specific to east Los Angeles, I want to take a less local approach and consider how alongside locating queers as being complicit with gentrification, might they also be positioned outside of it. I will consider what the aesthetic implications of this might be on sub-urban space. I employ the term sub-urban, as distinct from both urban and suburban, to name a reconceptualization of the city that takes into account the necessary excess produced by the city that cannot be contained by its zoning. This conception hearkens to the etymology of the *sub-* in suburban, as outside of and spatially beneath the elevated and walled Roman city.

The paper will proceed in three parts. The first, *The Queen Is Dead*, turns to a filmic example of adult sub-urban space. The second, *I Sit Down on the Sling Seat and See the City Spread Out between My Legs*, provides a textual example of adolescent sub-urban space. And the third, *The Future Is Always a Day Away*, establishes the theoretical framework in which the argument is couched. Significantly, this framework draws on Lee Edelman’s indictment against the Child in his book *No Future*, which itself draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis and the idea that the future is linguistically-bound. Edelman’s Child is analogized to the discourse surrounding gentrification not only as it privileges creating safe neighborhoods for the rearing of real children, but also as it invests in the idea of a brighter future.

The Queen Is Dead

John Waters’ 1977 film *Desperate Living* offers a depiction of place wherein waste in a physical sense is elided with those populations of peoples who will be figured as excessive within an economy of reproductive futurism. The film opens on a scene of seemingly idyllic, suburban domesticity with children playing in front of a Colonial Revival-styled home in the affluent community of Guilford in Baltimore, Maryland. The first non-diegetic dialogue, however, immediately undermines this scene by rehearsing the trope of the hysterical woman, as

the man of the house, Bosley, discusses the psychological condition of his wife, Peggy, with a doctor on the porch. Soon, Peggy, along with her maid, Grizelda, will murder Bosley and escape in exile to Mortville, a sort of penal colony of the greater Baltimore area. Like Peggy and Grizelda, two other significant characters, Mole and Muffy, have also arrived in Mortville after murdering men. All four women, at different points in the film and at different levels of consent, engage in homosexual acts.

Throughout, the deficiencies of Mortville, a town with no toilets and no banks, are described in terms of the people who live there—"It's a special town for people [. . .] who should be so embarrassed by what they've done," "They let killers live there scot-free," "It's filthy, and the people are repulsive," "It's a village of idiots." However, Mortville is not only physiognomically defined (i.e., the cesspool of the town does not only or merely reflect the depravity of its citizenry), but also imperatively and consciously constructed, as when the queen of Mortville, Queen Carlotta (who at the end of the film is about to be eaten by her subjects), makes a royal proclamation that "You must live here in constant mortification."

Indeed, mortification is the namesake of the town, and it represents the dialectic of the subhuman/sub-urban slum. On the one hand, Mortville is a full satirical realization of the dearth of social benefits under a neoliberal regime, one in which civic engagement does not accord livelihood. On the other, the choice to live in Mortville is a queer choice, a choice not to participate in reproduction—of the Symbolic (the linguistic signifier of Lacan's three psychoanalytic orders and that which structures the "natural" Imaginary), of biology, of industry—but to live in squalor. In terms of mortification, this is on the one hand shame and humiliation, but on the other, death and decay.

In this latter sense, Mortville recalls the abjection of the sub-urban and historically references a time before industrialization when the suburbs signified a place that could not afford and were not afforded, centralized infrastructure. As such, they were seen as places of wastage. The ideology of the suburbs that Mortville reveals speaks to Georges Bataille's concept of the accursed share within a general economy: "The world is perpetually choked or poisoned by its own riches, stimulated to develop mechanisms for the elimination of excess: it is not necessity,

but its contrary, luxury, which poses the fundamental problems of living matter and mankind” (qtd. in Land 56). Voicing Mortville as a spatial configuration of unredeemable excess and in a reversal of typical gentrification narratives, when Peggy and Grizelda first arrive, having moved from the affluent suburb to the sub-urban, Mole remarks, “You let the riffraff in, and they bring the neighborhood down every time.”

I Sit Down on the Sling Seat and See the City Spread Out between My Legs

While Waters’ Mortville is inhabited decidedly by adults, as evidenced by Peggy and Muffy who have left their children behind in exile, in William S. Burroughs’ 1971 novel *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead*, it is children who dominate and determine activity. The book, however, differs significantly from other stories that focus primarily on the socialities of boys, most notably William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Certainly there is a similarity in the way that savagery surfaces and is subsequently released, but *Lord of the Flies* contains boys in a way that *The Wild Boys* does not—they are all British and live on an island; they are not explicitly sexual and pacify themselves before the officer who appears at the end of the book; as characters, they exist formally within the confines of narrative convention. Burroughs, on the other hand, depicts a scenario in which gangs of boys—amalgamations of different races, ethnicities, and fetish-types—engage in rituals of death and successfully wage guerilla-style war against behavioral and legal restriction. The wild boys serve two representative functions. The first is as cite for the exploration of ephebophilic eroticism, which places the boys in numerous scenes of sexual encounter with each other. The second, and importantly intertwined with the first, is as foil to dominant forms of the law that censor sexuality and drug use and information more generally. Figured as children, the boys represent less an escape from compulsory submissiveness to authority than an imagined situation of alterity in which desire is communalized. These children cannot be invested in, in the name of the future, but rather have more in common with the prolonged and indeed indefinite adolescence of the *sinthomosexual*, as described below in the third section. Here the sub-urban environment begins to resemble the ruins of children’s street culture, one in which, as Dr Tim Edensor describes in his defence of industrial ruins:

Away from the regulatory instincts of parents and other adults, children may make their own rules and give full rein to their imagination, unchecked by the behavioral conventions imposed by their elders. So it is that the sheds and offices of ruins serve as dens for children's gangs, territories marked with signs of belonging—'Keep Out'—and slogans of subcultural allegiance and tags. (26)

This translates into the ephemeral and informal congregations of expended camps and shelters of the wild boys. The interstitial spaces of queer sex, drug use, and crime have not been contained and revitalized but spread, a vision that the apocalypse is not something that has happened or is yet to come, but that has already always been here as a festering threat, slowly decomposing a developmental, adult reality.

Waters is able to convey decomposition filmically as a story that is unconventional in its content, but Burroughs goes one step further in the subversion of his chosen medium. He does so through the implementation of a so-called cut-up method wherein pieces of text, both found and of the author's hand, are scissored and rearranged at random. The result is less a story in which could be located a narrative arc and more a surgical examination of situational tableau. The rampant repetition of sex and sex scenes as they appear in vignette-form, then, accompanies the trail of space, left by the wild boys, of archaeological revelation and global expansion:

Wild boys in the streets whole packs of them vicious as famished dogs. There is almost no police force in operation and everyone who can afford it has private guards. [. . .] Waves of decoration and architecture have left a series of strata-like exposed geologic formations. There isn't a place in the world you can't find a piece of it in Marrakech, a St. Louis street, a Mexican cantina, that house straight from England, Alpine huts in the mountains, a vast film set where the props are continually shifting. The city has spread in all directions up into the Atlas mountains to the east, south to the Sahara, westward to the coastal cities, up into the industrial reservations of the north. (Burroughs 50)

Here sub-urban space is not figured in terms of betterment and beautification through a cycle of investment, but as somewhere between a wound and a scar.

The Future Is Always a Day Away

To begin, it is important to acknowledge the danger of thinking about gentrification on the scale of queer subjects or of connoting a causal relationship. As Neil Smith notes, “Those who can be seen moving in are blamed for gentrification, whereas without a more analytical assessment those more powerful interests moving capital out of and into urban neighbourhoods are rendered comparatively invisible” (4). Hence, Tongson’s “upwardly mobile queers” are connected to metronormativity, homonormativity, and neoliberalism, discourses wherein individuals act in concert with broader political and politicized regimes.

Within these discourses, and specifically associated with a liberal humanist discourse, Lee Edelman foregrounds his discussion of the necessary and necessarily queer exclusion from the realm of politics in his polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In this book, Edelman contentiously continues and updates the antisocial/antirelational thesis in queer theory, which in general argues that queer eros undoes the unified subject and its ability to participate in society. Edelman’s contribution to this line of thought is complicated and nuanced and draws from Lacanian psychoanalytic thought to suggest that politics are dependent on a fantasy of the future, for we forget their place within the Symbolic order. As such, the meaning we derive from the political does not correlate to a positive symbol of material value or meaning or even to language as a whole system itself, but to the arbitrary relation of the signifier to the signified wherein political meaning is constituted by an infinite chain of exclusions and deferrals. To realize this is to realize the fantastic in the future, to realize the future is never somewhere at which we can arrive, but a forever-moving point that will make perpetual prohibitions to sustain intelligibility. Bearing the burden of this intelligibility is the figure of the Child, which not only equates the social and embodied future, but also the heteronormative imperative to engage in procreative sex.

The queer move, then, is not to hail the call of assimilation to potentiality, the call of fulfilling a preordained time of revolution to come, nor to imply that to oppose assimilation is somehow better, for to do so is still to attempt to work toward the future. Rather, the queer move is to embrace insistently and persistently the failure in being excluded from the Symbolic order, both in the sense of being figured as such, but also in the impossibility of exclusion. Edelman sculpts this queer move in the form of the neologism *sinthomosexual*, as he who “opposes the fantasy that generates endless narratives of generation” (11). The *sinthomosexual* takes its prefix from Lacan’s *sinthome*, or the knot that binds the Symbolic with the Real and the Imaginary for the subject. The *sinthomosexual* emphasizes the point at which the Real emerges in the Symbolic, the irony in language that reverses meaning at the same time that it points to language’s meaninglessness, and the drive towards death in the face of an instinct towards pleasure.

Criticism of *No Future* has come in the form of the myopia of Edelman’s archival case studies both in terms of sex and race. Related to this, is the overarching sentiment that the project too easily elides a psychoanalytic, cultural, and aesthetic archive with material and empirical lives and politics. As Tim Dean describes, this extends to an earlier misreading of the antisocial thesis itself that confuses anti-normative sociality with sociality per se—“queer theory and politics need a vigorously argued antisocial thesis, in order to grasp how beyond the normative coordinates of selfhood lies an orgy of connection that no regime can regulate” (826-8).

Aware of and sensitive to these criticisms, I invoke Edelman here not to entirely abandon politics and hope, as José Muñoz notes a truly Edelman-inspired reading necessarily would (Muñoz 353-367). Rather, I do so because the imperative to be productive and to reproduce also conditions our experience of space: “The dynamic colonization of space by capital infers that all space has the potential to become lucrative, whether now or in the future” (8). *No Future* coupled with queer geographies like those writ by Tongson and Judith Halberstam provide me an alternate aesthetic optic through the above two prefigurations of unproductive space may be accounted.

In *No Future*, Edelman provides a reading of Judith Butler's reading of *Antigone* that illustrates the difference between an oppositional homosexual tactics and those of the *sinthomosexual*. While Butler *saves* Antigone by arguing that the radicality of her gesture was ultimately and legitimately recognized, Edelman reminds us that this recognition while on the one hand marking a dilation of the Symbolic, also means the exclusion if not of Antigone, then of someone else. I acknowledge this within the context of this paper because the living tomb of Antigone is a spatial trope of erosion and darkness. In terms of sub-urban space, the analogy here is of the machine of signification to that of industrial production. While the city operates on the discursive level of an ever-increasing efficiency, "waste materials offer evidence for a radical critique of the myth of universal progress driven by the supposedly innovative power of capitalism and technology" (Edensor 101). No matter the ways in which the city is sanitized, the project of sanitation obscures the inevitability of waste. Rather than see queer subjects as complicit in this process, I have shown how they might reveal and revel in unkempt space.

Desperate Living and *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* offer two counter-narratives to the one of queer urban mobility offered in the introduction, both of which reject a progressive politics in which gentrification might take place. Instead, they offer a glimpse of sub-urban space emptied of production and reproduction. The result is sick space—space that allows and enhances an aesthetic of squandering, illegibility, and excess. In *Desperate Living* this a shantytown secluded in the woods. Precarious shelter houses a society that has accepted its status as illegal. Exploding that fixed and contained model, the wild boys have done the same, however, as a global tribe, they have extended transgression across time and space not specific to place. As in *No Future*, where the *sinthomosexual* is necessarily unable to participate in politics, so too are these spaces unable to accommodate speculative appraisal. The importance of exploring them is as an imagination of an urban fabric and fabrication in which emptied space might matter and the sub-urban ruin, both fictional and material, might become legible not as a problem or nuisance, but as space importantly nuanced by those who, by force or by choice, inhabit it.

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